FROM ACID TESTS TO RAVES: PSYCHEDELIA THEN AND NOW

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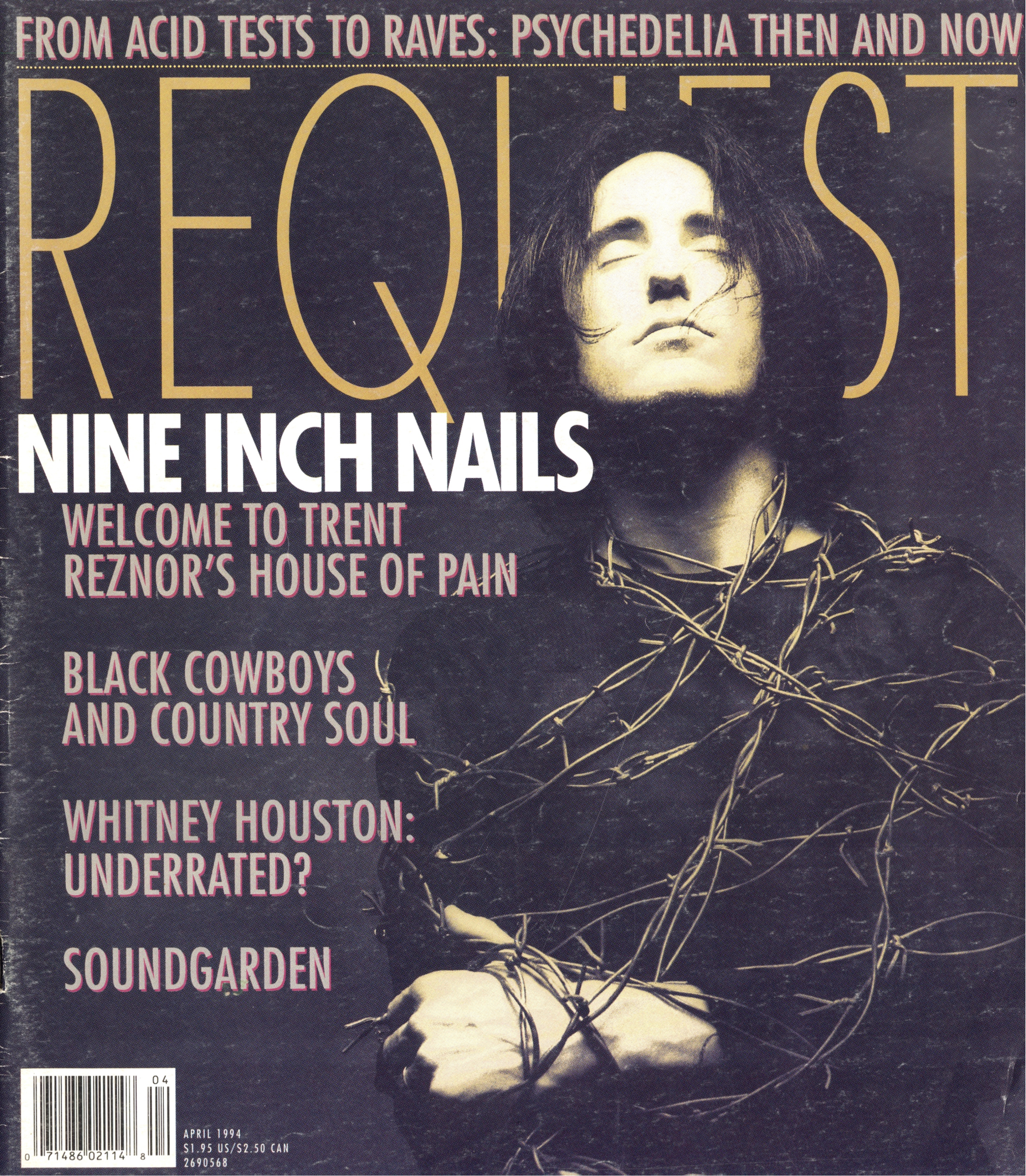

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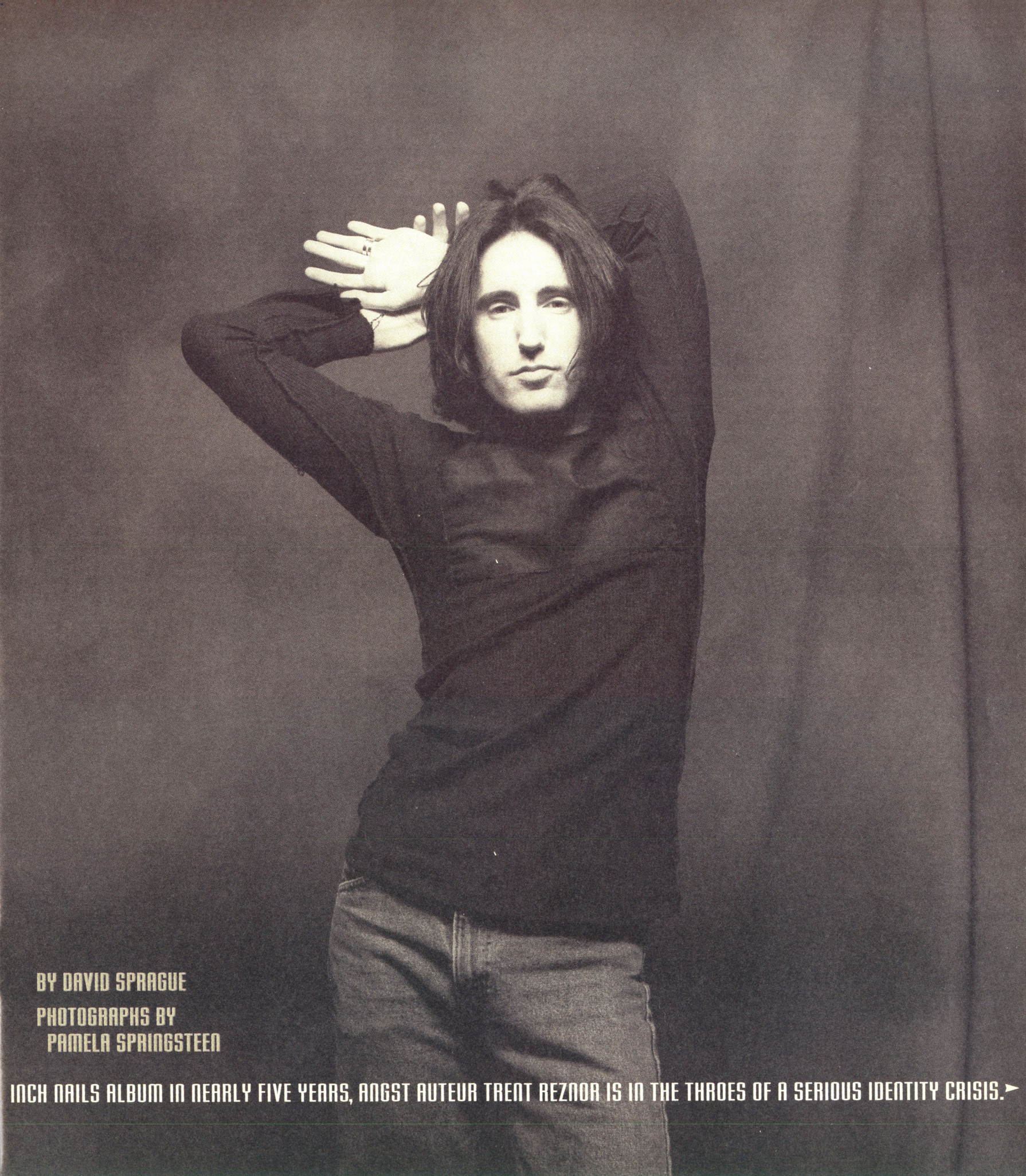
TRENT REZNOR

OF NINE INCH NAILS HAS DONE EVERYTHING HE'S EVER WANTED. TOO BAD HE'S STILL MISERABLE.

IT SHOULD COME AS NO SURPRISE THAT, TWO MONTHS BEFORE THE RELEASE OF *THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL*, THE FIRST NINE



BY DAVID SPRAGUE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
PAMELA SPRINGSTEEN

INCH NAILS ALBUM IN NEARLY FIVE YEARS, ANGST AUTEUR TRENT REZNOR IS IN THE THROES OF A SERIOUS IDENTITY CRISIS.►

After spending much of the past two years holed up alone in the studio, Reznor has emerged with a collection of songs that a handful of previewers have dubbed everything from this year's answer to U2's *Achtung Baby* to commercial suicide, neither of which sits particularly well with a psyche racked by a volatile blend of neuroses and perfectionism.

"One of the main questions that plagued me as I was working was, 'Is this any good at all?' " says Reznor, sitting in a cafe a short walk from his rented Hollywood Hills home. "I'm not really sure. I think I've taken a chance: It might be a more marketable or even a better record if it had a 'Head Like a Hole' stuck on it, but I can't speak objectively at this point.

"I've had a couple of people say, 'I like this, but I don't think the general public will.' I know what [they] mean—I liked *Broken* [a caustic 1992 EP that entered *Billboard*'s Top 10 its first week], but when I put it out, I thought I'd alienate every one of my fans, and I think subconsciously I wanted to because I'd just had enough. For that, I got a Grammy."

Reznor overcame more than music-industry conservativism to pick up that award, which is still packed in a box awaiting his eventual move back to New Orleans, a city he became enamored with during a 1991 sojourn. Not long after the 1989 release of *Pretty Hate Machine*, Nine Inch Nails' debut that went platinum and established industrial music as a force to be reckoned with, Reznor and his label at the time, TVT, locked horns in a battle that rapidly escalated from pissing match to legal war.

"I basically had a nervous breakdown," he says. "I realized that as cool as Nine Inch Nails was, it was probably over at that point because we were in a real bad situation with the label, which I'll just say completely repressed me in every way artistically. There was no way I could do another album. The average person may not realize how concerned I am with how Nine Inch Nails appears, in terms of what our covers look like, where we place ads, what they look like. When you're hooked up with a company that is doing everything they can to push you in a direction you don't feel comfortable with, everything becomes a big issue."

He goes on to insist that TVT, particularly its president, Steve Gottleib, tried to push the band down a more commercial path than Reznor had mapped out. Reznor cites arguments over videos, singles, and tour support, and insists he wasn't paid royalties due him. So while the band (which at that point consisted of Reznor plus hired guns Lee Mars, Richard Patrick, and Chris Vrenna) played the first Lollapalooza tour—racking up enough new fans that it outsold headliners Jane's Addiction by a wide margin at the merchandise stalls—Reznor called a strike against TVT, refusing to record or even make contact with the label and launching vitriolic assaults against it in the media.

While Gottleib has steered clear of public comment on Reznor's jibes, simply stating, "the record would seem to speak for itself," he agreed to be interviewed at TVT's New York City offices, the walls of which still display plenty of memorabilia touting the departed Nails. "As a label, we've always looked for very self-contained artists," Gottleib says. "We've never told any artist, 'This is your image, this is the kind of music you should be making, this is the video director we want you to use.'

"I'm not aware of Trent having ever been in an argument with myself or a staff person about anything. I have never seen or heard about him being upset with anyone at TVT. Trent, as do all our artists, worked with the people he wanted to work with." While he declines to get into specifics about the breakdown between the parties, the personal aspects of the split clearly have affected Gottleib more than the complicated financial arrangements, which ensure TVT will receive a sizable portion of Nine Inch Nails' publishing royalties.

At the time, the pressures of newfound popularity likewise were closing in on Reznor. "If you'd asked me before *Pretty Hate Machine* what my ideal career would be, I'd have said that three or four records in, I'd like a gold record," he says. "I'd have liked time to hone my craft and get an audience that, over time, would grow. If I had to pick a career I'd like to mimic, it'd be the Cure, or Depeche Mode even. They've pretty much stuck to their guns and their audiences have grown steadily. I thought [*Pretty Hate Machine*] was really good for the time, and I still do. But when it came out, I had very modest expectations. Plus, TVT thought it sucked and told me if I sold 20,000 it would be a miracle."

Gottleib calls that recollection a "categorical falsehood," pointing to an intensive marketing campaign that was launched months before the album's release and continued through its chart success. He's adamant that he personally "loved" *Pretty Hate Machine* from his first listen. "Given the enormous effort and enormous amount of money we spent on promoting *Pretty Hate Machine*, it's obvious that we were passionately committed to both the artist and the record," he says. "Every request Trent made was granted 100 percent, and relative to the success level that was there at the time, the amount of support was probably greater than is typical."

EVEN THAT MODEST 20,000 might have appeared to be out of reach for a seemingly average, slightly shy kid who had a penchant for Kiss and Pink Floyd while growing up in Mercer, Pennsylvania, a town of about 2,500 in the state's rural northwest corner. Reznor's fascination with the latter group, and later with the Cure, led him to take up the piano, an instrument he soon swapped for an electronic keyboard. Just out of his teens, he joined his first band, the Innocence, an unremarkable combo with a repertoire heavy on covers of such bands as Journey and the Fixx. The band's only single, the earliest recorded evidence of Reznor's musical career, sports a sleeve adorned by a photo of a young Trent with said keyboard slung jauntily around his neck.

To Reznor's credit, he takes such pop archeology in stride. Rather than deny his past (à la the Black Crowes' Chris Robinson) or attempt to justify it (like Dr. Dre), he acknowledges the band's mediocrity and points to it as evidence of his need to escape small-town life. "I don't have any problems with my background," he says. "My family was cool, but you see cool people and cool things on TV and there was absolutely nothing to do in my hometown. The coolest thing was the opening of the new McDonald's. In a place like that, it becomes ingrained that your expectations should be less because that's all you deserve."

Reznor's first post-Mercer stop was brief: a stay in Erie, Pennsylvania, where he joined up with a new wave band, the Urge. After a few months, he moved the 100 miles to Cleveland, where he attended college, majoring in computer engineering (one classmate remembers him as "a really nice guy, a little preppy even"), and took odd jobs, first in a local music shop, and then as an assistant at Right Track, one of the city's plushest studios. "I cleaned toilets by day so I could have someplace to work on my music at night," he recalls. "But Cleveland wasn't that bad. It's lacking in some things, but it provided a good place for me to get my shit together."

Besides working on his own music in seclusion, Reznor was active in a long succession of fairly varied bands around Cleveland; the one that probably reached the largest audience was the fictional Problems, a celluloid-only combo that provided counterpoint at the tail end of 1987's Joan Jett/Michael J. Fox movie, *Light of Day*. At the time, Reznor was a member of a popular local band known as the Exotic Birds, and his screen presence wasn't that far from his nascent musical attitude, which he laughingly describes as "fickle synth-pop idiot."

That capriciousness led him to stints in Slam Bamboo (a fey electro-pop band with which he also did a single) and, more interestingly, Lucky Pierre, a dark, moody combo with roots stretching back to the halcyon days of the Cleveland underground. That band's leader, Kevin McMahon, has maintained contact with Reznor, who will release the first record by McMahon's new group, Prick, on Reznor's custom label, Nothing.

"The bands I was playing in weren't really my taste, in terms of what I would have written, but it was a challenge to step out of what I liked to see if I could play it," Reznor says. "I didn't dislike what I was doing, but it wasn't remotely close to what I would have done on my own. I like AC/DC's old records, but I'm not going to play something like that."

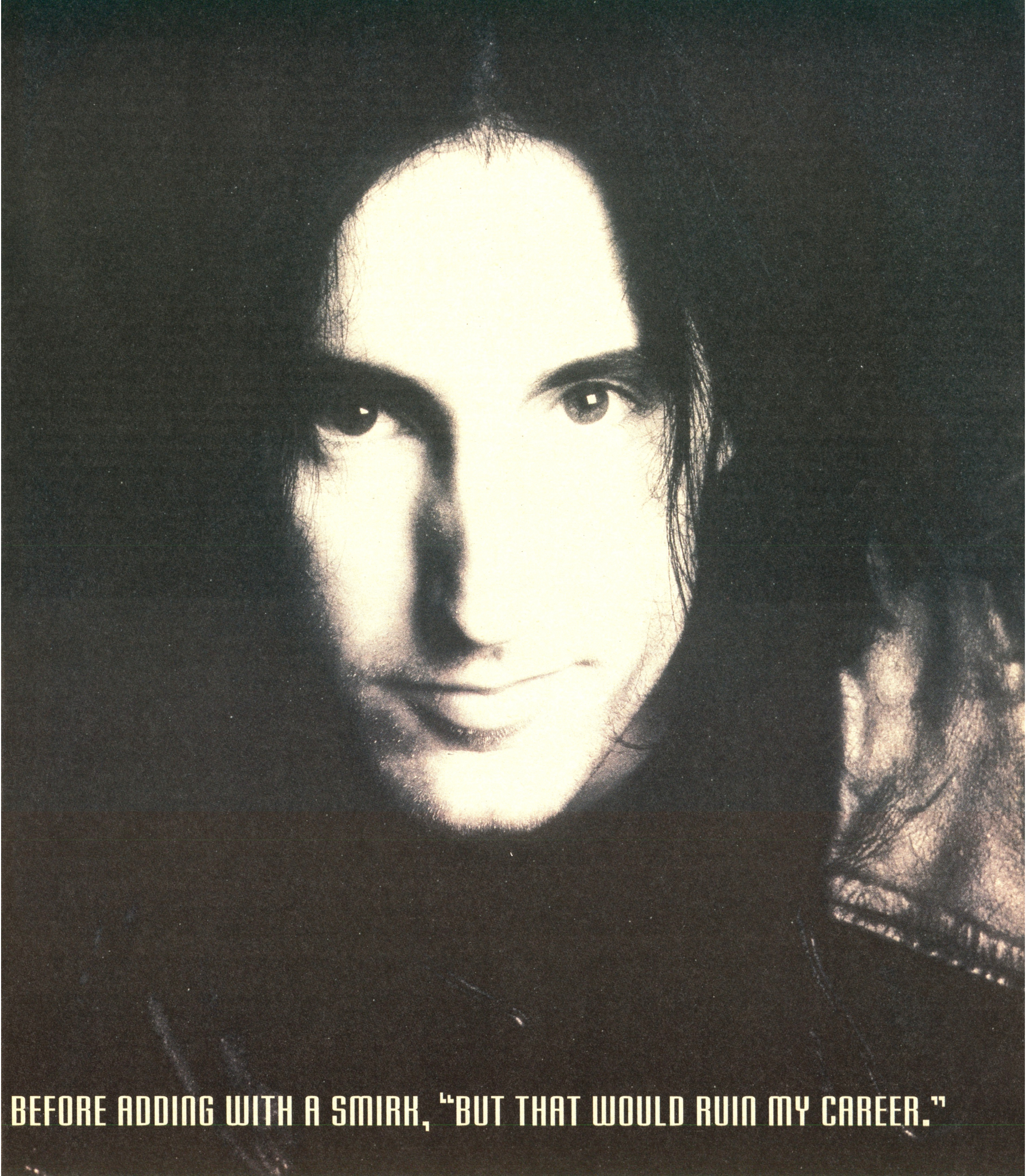
On his own, Reznor developed an aesthetic largely shaped by Chicago's Wax Trax label, particularly the work of another synth-pop refugee, Ministry's Al Jourgenson. Reznor says that, despite the solitary nature of his Nine Inch Nails debut, he would have preferred a more collaborative setting, but insists, rather dolefully, "every time I ended up asking for help, I ended up disappointed and having to do it myself with time wasted." (A source who became close to Reznor on the tours that followed *Pretty Hate Machine* says he had a dictatorial streak wide enough to mark a superhighway.)

Ultimately, Reznor dismissed the original NIN lineup, only to recall longtime roommate/high school pal Vrenna more than a year later. "His role in the studio is more an assistant than anything: If we need a drum set taken into 30 different rooms and sampled, he'll do that. He'll listen to five movies a day looking for ambience that evokes a texture," he says of the drummer. "But most importantly, he understands where I'm coming from.

"What I'm trying to do is challenge what is accepted: I think if a belief passes a test, it's ultimately worth more," Reznor explains, eyes darting about the room. "I realize that I'm working within the parameters of the music business. If I didn't want to sell records I wouldn't be on a record label. But although I like bands like Test Department and Coil, less song-oriented bands, I'm fully aware that Nine Inch Nails works within the context of writing songs with choruses and hooks. That gives it a certain degree of commerciality, and I think that's a good platform to slip in some messages that are a bit subversive."

REZNOR CERTAINLY MANAGED to do that with the much-discussed, little-seen 1992 video for "Happiness in Slavery," a clip that depicted cystic fibrosis-stricken performance artist Bob Flanagan being strapped (vol-

"I'M ALWAYS A LITTLE BIT DEPRESSED, AND I SHOULD PROBABLY GO TO THERAPY," REZNOR ADMITS,



BEFORE ADDING WITH A SMIRK, "BUT THAT WOULD RUIN MY CAREER."

untarily) into a device that sexually assaulted, dismembered, and killed him. While he rates the video as "not great," Reznor admits to taking pleasure in the furor surrounding its release. He denies, however, that the more extreme moments on *The Downward Spiral*, like the emotionally draining title track with its point-blank suicide note, are designed to shock for the sake of shocking.

"I had some reservations about [that song] being on there. I realize that I may have to go on trial one day if someone kills themselves with it around. Is it the most responsible thing to say? No, but I'm not saying to go do it. I think if I wanted to, I should say, 'Go do it,' " he says, taking a long pause to collect his thoughts. "But I think the worst thing in the world would be someone hearing this record as an endorsement of suicide. It is absolutely not that; it's a moment that worked in the context of the story being told on the record. I have a degree of discomfort about it, just like I have a degree about saying, 'Kill me' [in the coda of "Eraser"] on a record. There are a lot of insane people out there.

"With this new record, I'm exploring subject matter that's not real uplifting, and some people will say, 'Oh, you're so depressed, don't you ever feel happy?' Of course I feel happy, but it's like if I was a director, and I was directing a movie about some heavy, sad topic. At the same time, Nine Inch Nails is a pretty accurate reflection of how I feel at the moment. If next week, I was to get married and feel completely happy and calm and placid, then it's time to stop the band or take it in a different direction. The only personal rule I ever made up—and when I did *Pretty Hate Machine* I was just learning to write songs—was to convey how I feel. People may like it or think it's whiny or ridiculous, but it is how I feel."

If that's the case, then in early 1994, Trent Reznor feels betrayed, bothered, and more than a little bewildered. Whereas *Pretty Hate Machine* presented a unified collection of songs that railed against the ever-amorphous "system," straying only slightly from well settled industrial-pop subject matter, the self-loathing *Broken* took things one step further. "I wanted it to be one bleak moment, one splash of acid on the skin," he says.

But on *The Downward Spiral*, things aren't quite so simple. In the numbingly harsh emotional and physical violence of songs such as "March of the Pigs" and "Big Man With a Gun," Reznor slips with ease from the role of victim to that of perpetrator. The themes aren't all that different—"Hurt" explores drugs as a means of escape, "Heresy" vents Nietzschean vitriol against God, and several songs rail against the evils of authority—but the album's dynamic range is striking. With songs spanning prewar Berlin decadence ("Piggy"), sexy, INXS-style groove-rock ("Closer"), and ambient quiescence ("A Warm Place"), the album should challenge the perception of Reznor as a mere industrial showman.

"I could see that we were about to box ourselves in a corner of 'Look how hard we are' and keep having to outdo that, and that's not me," he says. "That's in me, but I've got more to say than that. It was also a decision to get away from verse-chorus-verse-chorus-middle-verse-chorus-end; every song I'd ever written had that structure. Bowie's *Low* was a gigantic influence that I just discovered. Some of those songs you start listening to and it fades out and you say, 'That's weird. Were there any vocals in that?' "

In order to capture a bit of that Thin White Mood on *The Downward Spiral*, Reznor and coproducer Flood (who also worked on *Broken*, although his contributions were largely mixed out) called in guitarist Adrian Belew, who was in town working with Paul Simon.

"We just said, 'We'll play a song, you play whatever you want on top,' " Reznor recalls with a chuckle. "He'd say something like, 'What key is it in?' and I'd be like, 'I dunno, probably E. Just play anything.' We started him on 'Mr. Self Destruct' because it was the harshest thing

THE INDUSTRIAL CORE

TO THE casual observer, industrial music consists of three Lollapalooza-endorsed proponents of the genre (Nine Inch Nails, Ministry, and Front 242) and little else. But look behind the accessible, acceptable face put forth by those groups and you'll find extremes never imagined by the hardiest punk/gangsta/metal monger.

COIL: Formed by Peter Christopherson after the dissolution of Throbbing Gristle (an influential '70s group that also spawned Psychic TV), this duo has spent more than a decade reveling in a world of decaying grandeur. Coil's moody ambience may not be visceral, but it's fascinating nonetheless. Recommended: *Scatology, Love's Secret Domain.*

CONTROLLED BLEEDING: Paul Lemos, a high school English teacher on Long Island, has used this moniker to release dozens of cassettes (many on his own Sound of Pig label) and 16 albums, alternating between blind aggression and sepulchral classicism. Both coexist on the compilation *Hog Floor.*

FOETUS: Aka You've Got Foetus on Your Breath, Scraping Foetus off the Wheel, and, to his mom, Jim Thirlwell. This New York City-based, Australia-born renaissance man has made his mark more as a producer/remixer, but his own projects, which combine horror-rock histrionics with industrial abrasion, are well worth seeking out. Recommended: *Thaw, Sink.*

EINSTÜRZENDE NEUBAUTEN (below): The name translates as "Collapsing New Buildings," and this excessive German aggregation does its best to approximate that sound by use of power tools, axes, and even flamethrowers, which makes its live shows anathema to many club owners. Guitarist Blixa Bargeld, who's done time with Nick Cave, provides the barest musical mortar for this, the most truly "industrial" of bands. Recommended: *80-83 Strategies Against Architecture, Drawings of Patient O.T.*

KMFDM (below): Playful, hip-hop-tinged industrial disco is the name of these crazy Krauts' game. That, and a heavy dose of politically aware irony, has made them one of the more consistently entertaining and commercial of the underground's spawn. Recommended: *Angst, Naive.*

NURSE WITH WOUND: Under this *nom de disque*, Londoner Steve Stapleton has released 20 or so slices of found-sound/musique concrete that are, more than anything, a modern-day equivalent of the early experiments of the Dada movement. Plenty of humor and precious little consistency make NWW an acquired but tantalizing taste. Recommended: *Psilotripitaka, Present the Sisters of Pataphysics.*

PSYCHIC TV: Recently run aground on the shores of acid house, Genesis P-Orridge and his band of merry pranksters still stand as one of the great conceptual groups in any genre, having gone so far as to invent a religion (The Temple ov Psychick Youth) for furthering their weird blend of easy-listening pop and pan-ethnic noisemaking. Recommended: *Force the Hand of Chance, Allegory and Self.*

SLEEP CHAMBER: This cult of Bostonians, centered around the sadomasochistic fantasies of the genuinely scary John ZeWizz, whips up (no pun intended) repetitive, ritualistic music that's creepily hypnotic. Many of the band's releases are accompanied by long-form pornographic videos that go well beyond even the industrial nation's norms. Recommended: *Submit to Desire.*

WHITEHOUSE: In both its music (an unmitigated assault of feedback and drone) and imagery (a queasily riveting amalgam of all sorts of "evil" elements), this oft-banned British band is probably the most extreme act, industrial or otherwise, extant today. Absolutely chilling. Recommended: *Thank Your Lucky Stars.*

ZOVIET FRANCE: This English crew has, for over a decade, provided a bucolic alternative to industrial's often-overweening abrasiveness. Its almost ethereal composite of world music (as approximated by sequencers) and medieval themes has grown more complex and compelling with the passage of time. Recommended: *Shouting at the Ground.*

—D.S.

we had and we wanted to put him through the wringer. He was awesome; I've never seen anyone play like him, with such a command of the instrument."

Aside from Belew's contributions (and a few percussive fillips from ex-Jane's Addiction drummer Steve Perkins), the 14 songs that make up *The Downward Spiral* came straight from the Macintosh Quadra that anchors Reznor's home studio. While acknowledged by those he's played with as preternaturally capable of mastering most any instrument he picks up, Reznor's reliance on computer-generated sound has drawn some catcalls from rock purists. In one of the terse biographies he's written for the group, Reznor sneered back, "Nine Inch Nails is still not a real band with real people playing real instruments."

"I'll tell anyone who comes to see us that we use tape on stage, we use synthesizers, and most of it comes out of a computer," he says. "You'd be surprised, if you sat in on a Metallica session, how much of that comes out of a computer, but people don't want to know that. It's all just marketing."

ON PAPER, REZNOR'S outlook may seem unflaggingly mordant, but the sense one gets from meeting the slim, almost frail 28-year-old is that he is an introverted young man still not equipped to deal with the scrutiny of ravenous fans and prying journalists. Over lunch, he displays a sharp sense of humor at the expense of Danny Bonaduce (who holds court loudly at the next table) as well as himself. "I'm always a little bit depressed, and I should probably go to therapy," he says, adding with a smirk, "but that would ruin my career."

When pressed further, however, he muses that the bunker mentality that allows him to stay sequestered in his studio for days on end springs in equal parts from his perfectionism ("I'm happy with maybe one of every five things I do") and a need to escape from an outside world that's made him skittish since adolescence. He grants that such reclusive traits aren't necessarily a boon to an artist of his stature, as borne out by his promise to deliver *The Downward Spiral* by the beginning of 1993, which he now recalls as "me talking out of my ass." As deadline after self-imposed deadline passed, Reznor found himself unable to complete anything to his liking. "I was working for the wrong reasons, just to get it done and get out of L.A. and tour," he says.

As last year dragged on, his new patrons at Interscope began to get antsy as well, and started setting deadlines of their own, which Reznor, true to form, ignored. The delays may also have been, he hints, his way of testing Interscope's loyalty, as if ponying up a sum rumored to be well into seven figures to free the Nails from the TVT contract wasn't enough.

"Absolutely," he nods. "We were basically slaved into this label, but as fate would have it, Interscope has been really cool. They give me money to do a record and let me do it. We work outside of them and basically treat them as a distributor. They show respect for me and my work, which I appreciate."

However, Reznor does have some doubts about his first dealings with Interscope in his role as CEO of Nothing, which he runs along with his manager John A. Malm, Jr. Headquartered in Lemko Hall, the plushest building in Cleveland's gentrifying Tremont section (an enclave just south of downtown that once provided a dirt-cheap crash pad for Reznor and Vrenna), Nothing has a roster that is set to include Prick, Coil (a long-lived atmospheric/industrial band led by Peter Christopherson), and Florida's Marilyn Manson.

It's the third group's often scatological, violent debut, which Reznor produced, that has given Interscope pause. Enough pause, in fact, that the label has refused to distribute it. "That's Ted 'Mr. No Censorship' Field talking out of both sides of his mouth," Reznor says, smirking. "He stood up to the system for Snoop Dogg, but this is just too much for him." Reznor and Malm have been given the opportunity to shop the album to other companies, but the singer says, with more than a trace of empathy, that he doesn't want to treat the band as a guinea pig.

With the first Nine Inch Nails tour since the 1991 Lollapalooza trek looming on the horizon—for which he's assembled a new band that includes Vrenna, keyboardist James Woolley, guitarist Robin Sinck, and multi-instrumentalist Danny Lohner—Reznor seems less self-assured than he appears to be when manically prowling concert stages. He's the first to admit that, as stated eloquently in the new album's "I Do Not Want This," Nine Inch Nails might have grown past the point he can handle. Perhaps the most telling line in that song's litany of dissatisfaction—indeed, perhaps the most revealing on an album filled with soul-baring moments—is the simple concluding entreaty, "I just want to do something that matters."

"I feel that way sometimes in fits of desperation and frustration," he says. "I want to make some impact, whether it's being a star or shooting a president or having a successful relationship with someone. I'm not sure what I want to do, but I want to matter to some degree to someone, or to myself."

He stops toying with his sandwich for a moment and grins, mostly to himself. "You know, I feel fortunate to be able to do what I do, but I don't feel content like I would if I'd surrounded myself with a bunch of good friends in a good situation in a place I like to be. The biggest revelation I've had about my own life is that I've done everything I've wanted to do and I'm still pretty miserable."